Case Report

Pulmonary tuberculosis and COVID-19 coinfection: Hickam’s Dictum revisited

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 and pulmonary tuberculosis (PTB) coinfection is associated with increased mortality and presents a unique diagnostic challenge to the clinician. We describe three cases of newly diagnosed PTB in COVID-19 patients treated at our centre and their clinical and radiological features. The challenges associated with diagnosis and management are also explored. Patient 1 was a case of smear positive, endobronchial tuberculosis incidentally diagnosed due to CT changes, and eventually made good recovery. Patient 2 was a case of COVID-19 who succumbed but was diagnosed posthumously due to a positive sputum culture for tuberculosis. Patient 3 showed radiographic features of PTB and was treated empirically for TB. In conclusion, COVID-19 and PTB coinfection should be suspected in the presence of constitutional symptoms, prior immunocompromised states, prolonged respiratory symptoms or fever, or unresolved radiological abnormalities, more so in regions where TB is endemic.

List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TB</td>
<td>tuberculosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTB</td>
<td>pulmonary tuberculosis</td>
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<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>computed tomography</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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<td>NPOP</td>
<td>nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTPA</td>
<td>computed tomography pulmonary angiogram</td>
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<td>HRCT</td>
<td>high resolution computed tomography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GGO</td>
<td>ground glass opacities</td>
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<td>ATT</td>
<td>anti-tuberculous therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>IGRA</td>
<td>interferon-gamma release assay</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 was declared a pandemic in 2020, whereas tuberculosis (TB) was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1993 [1]. Both diseases manifest as respiratory illnesses with varying severities and display similar symptoms [2], reflecting Hickam’s dictum which states that multiple symptoms and signs may be due to more than one disease [3]. TB is endemic in the state of Sarawak, Malaysia, with a 2016 incidence of 104.23 per 100,000 population, far above the national average of 81.3 per 100,000 population [4]. Pulmonary TB (PTB) and COVID-19 co-infection has been well-reported [2,5–9] with meta-analysis showing increased risk of mortality [10]. We describe three cases of newly diagnosed PTB in COVID-19 patients treated at our tertiary centre, discuss their varied clinical and radiological presentations, and elucidate the challenges associated with diagnosis and management of PTB and COVID-19 co-infection. All three patients were infected with COVID-19 before the introduction of COVID vaccines.

1.1. Case presentation

1.1.1. Patient 1

A 61-year-old woman with a history of total abdominal hysterectomy and salpingectomy for cervical carcinoma initially visited the surgical clinic with complaints of abdominal bloating and loss of weight for a month, associated with a recent dry cough for one week. She denied shortness of breath, fever, haemoptysis, sore throat, anosmia or dysgeusia. Computed tomography (CT) of the abdomen and pelvis showed no intrabdominal abnormalities, however, ground glass opacities were observed at bilateral lower zones of the lung. Rapid nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal (NPOP) antigen assay for COVID-19 was positive, and she was admitted to the isolation ward.

On admission, she was apyrexial and normotensive, but was noted to be tachycardic (heart rate of 128 beats per minute), tachypnoeic (respiratory rate of 22 breaths per minute) and had an oxygen saturation of 89% under room air. Arterial blood gas taken under room air revealed type 1 respiratory failure (pH 7.46, PO$_2$ 67 mmHg, PCO$_2$ 30 mmHg, HCO$_3$ 28 mmol/L). Electrocardiogram showed atrial fibrillation with fast ventricular response, but no ischemic or myocarditis changes. Chest radiograph revealed bilateral nodular and airspace opacities (Fig. 1A).

Dexamethasone and lopinavir/ritonavir were administered as per local COVID-19 treatment guidelines at the time. She required invasive mechanical ventilation for three days. Endotracheal aspirates sampled for bacterial culture and respiratory virus PCR panel (QIAstat-Dx, QIAGEN, Maryland, United States) were negative. Post-extubation, she remained oxygen dependent and computed tomography pulmonary angiogram (CTPA) was performed on day 7 of admission. CTPA showed pulmonary embolism in the segmental branch of right descending pulmonary artery, generalized, diffuse peri-bronchovascular ground glass changes bilaterally, interlobular and intralobular septal thickening at bilateral upper lobes, focal consolidation at the lateral basal segment of the left lower lobe, and tree-in-bud nodules bilaterally (Fig. 2A). Sputum smear examination was positive for acid fast bacilli. Molecular testing for M. TB nucleic acids (Cepheid Xpert MTB/RIF, https://www.cepheid.com) revealed no rifampicin resistance. She was commenced on anti-coagulant and anti-tuberculous therapy (ATT) consisting of rifampicin, isoniazid, pyrazinamide, and ethambutol, and finally weaned off to room air on day 32 of admission. Follow-on high resolution computed tomography (HRCT) of the thorax at day 40 of admission showed resolution of ground glass changes and absence of septal thickening. However, there were increased diffuse centrilobular lung nodules with traction bronchiectasis at bilateral lower lobes, consistent with endobronchial TB (Fig. 2B). She was discharged well and completed a six-month course of ATT. Chest radiograph taken 3 months post-discharge showed resolving opacities (Fig. 1B).

1.1.2. Patient 2

A 63-year-old woman with underlying type 2 diabetes mellitus presented to a district clinic with loss of weight and loss of appetite for the last two months, two weeks of lethargy and poor oral intake, one week of fever and productive cough with whitish sputum, and rapidly worsening shortness of breath for the past two days. She was normotensive but tachycardic (pulse rate 115 beats per minute) and tachypneic (respiratory rate 28 breaths per minute) and had an oxygen saturation of 96% under room air. She was...